

NORTH FORK OF THE LITTLE HUMBOLDT RIVER WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 69,683 acres

The North Fork of the Little Humboldt River WSA (NV-020-827) is located in north-central Nevada, in north-eastern Humboldt County. The WSA includes 69,683 acres of public lands and surrounds 80 acres of private inholdings. A natural gas pipeline was used for the northern boundary; the Greeley Crossing-Whiskey Springs Road comprises the majority of the western boundary, section lines were used for the southern boundary and the east boundary is the Button Lake-Milligan Creek Road. The WSA has an irregular elongated shape and measures approximately 19 miles north-south and from 3 to 9 miles east-west.

The study area lies within the central Little Owyhee Desert and straddles 14 miles of the North Fork of the Little Humboldt River Gorge. The area is a high, Great Basin desert landscape with gently rolling to flat terrain and shallow-cut drainages and rounded ridge tops. The uniform desert landscape is interrupted by a 700' deep gorge that runs north-south through the study area. The gorge is over 700 feet deep in places.

Vegetation throughout most of the study area is low growing sagebrush with scattered big sagebrush flats. The gorge supports lush riparian vegetation with willow, red osier dogwood, tamarisk and native grasses. Elevations range from 4,700 to 6,000 feet.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE

The recommendation for this report is to designate 8,900 acres as wilderness and to release 60,783 acres for uses other than wilderness.

The recommended portion is essentially the river gorge, with a slight setback from the cliffs. This area includes a substantially natural landscape nearly void of human imprints or improvements and outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation, including day-hiking, camping, backpacking, hunting, horse-packing, rock climbing and nature study. The isolation and the scenic beauty of the gorge offer outstanding recreation experiences to the visitor. There are also outstanding opportunities for solitude provided by the excellent topographic screening. This recommendation would designate as wilderness a perennial stream with its associated riparian habitat, a feature uncommon in Nevada. It would also help to protect two plants listed as sensitive on the Nevada Native Plant Society list.

The areas not recommended for wilderness include most of the WSA outside of the river gorge. This includes areas of low wilderness values, traditional ORV use and moderate geothermal potential. Due to the extremely low use this area receives, most of the WSA would retain the natural values that it does contain.

The northern and western sections are flat to rolling plateaus, almost completely accessible to off-road vehicles. The western portion also has an 80-acre parcel of private land and three cherrystemmed roads. The wilderness values for this portion are not as high as those located in the gorge. These values are of a different character, being a flat rolling landscape as compared to the deep cutting effect of the gorge.

There is a potential demand for geothermal waters. It was felt that the option to keep these waters, which are located in the southeastern portion of the WSA, available for use should remain open. This interest would result in exploration in the area recommended for nonwilderness, consisting of cross-country travel, small drill sites and 1/2 mile of access road disturbing 5 acres.

A portion of the recommended area (1,900 acres) has low mineral potential; the remainder has none. There is no known potential for oil and gas and the potential for geothermal resources is unknown.

The southern area that is recommended for nonwilderness is adjacent to large tracts of private land, including one cattle ranch. About one-third of it is accessible to off-road vehicles. A cherrystem road from the south nearly bisects this portion.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The WSA is primarily natural. The study area lies within the central Little Owyhee Desert and straddles 14 miles of the North Fork of the Little Humboldt River Gorge. The naturalness of the two major geologic features are quite different. The area is a high, Great Basin desert landscape with gently rolling to flat terrain and shallow-cut drainages and rounded ridge tops. The uniform desert landscape is interrupted by a deeply-cut river gorge that runs north-south through the study area. The gorge is over 700 feet deep in places.

There are minimal improvements, including eight small reservoirs, three fences, two corrals and 8 miles of vehicle ways. These are located in the portion recommended for nonwilderness designation. Outside sights and sounds include ranches visible from the southern boundary and light vehicle traffic along the boundary roads. The recommended portion has no improvements except for 1-mile of a way.

B. Solitude: The North Fork of the Little Humboldt River WSA offers outstanding opportunities for solitude. The types of solitude are different between the two major geologic features. Topographic and vegetative screening within the river gorge are excellent. The configuration of the canyon lends itself to high screening capabilities due to its winding nature and close confinement, being extremely narrow in places. The plateau areas to the north and west, although lacking in natural screening, offer fair to good solitude due to their large size. The southern area lacks screening and is, to a large extent, within view of nearby ranches.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: There are outstanding opportunities for various types of recreation, including day-hiking, backpacking, camping, hunting, horse-packing, rock climbing and nature study. These activities are concentrated in that portion recommended for wilderness. This area also offers diverse wildlife in the rugged scenic canyon. Game species include deer, antelope, cougar, chukar, sage grouse, quail and pheasant. Beaver are also present in the gorge. Recreation outside of the portion recommended for wilderness is fair, except for hunting (antelope) and nature study (wild horse viewing) which are considered excellent.

D. Special Features: The gorge of the North Fork of the Little Humboldt River is considered a significant special feature of geologic and ecologic significance. This 200 foot to over 700 foot deep gorge was cut during high runoff periods in the Pleistocene through a relatively featureless basalt and andesite plateau. This gorge harbors a great deal of wildlife and plants, including beaver, muskrat, mink and cougar and two species of rare plants. The plants are listed as sensitive on the Nevada Native Plant Society list. Artemisia packardiae no longer has any federal protection as it is more common than originally believed. The other, Hackelia ophiobia, is no longer considered to be under any threat. Its federal classification is category 3C which means it is no longer considered for listing as threatened and endangered.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The entire WSA is manageable as wilderness. There would be no major conflicts with the exception of the 80 acres of private inholdings and the 498 acres of oil and gas leases.

There would be management problems, however, associated with that portion of the WSA recommended for nonwilderness. Most of that area is accessible to off-road vehicles. The presence of the private property around the south end would reduce solitude. The roads and ways in this portion would reduce naturalness as would the range improvements.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

As a result of the available information, the BLM reached the following conclusions: 9,000 acres of moderately favorable land for geothermal steam and 7,050 acres of moderately favorable land for nonmetallic minerals (zeolite). Geothermal exploration has subsided compared to the past, however, proposed developments are increasing in the surrounding areas.

Mineral potential for portions of the recommended suitable portion of the WSA is low. The remainder of the recommended area has no known mineral potential. There is no known potential for oil and gas and geothermal potential is unknown. There are presently no mining claims and 498 acres of oil and gas leases in the WSA.

In summary, quantities of various minerals are unknown but there is a moderate potential for occurrence for nonmetallic minerals and geothermal steam.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC COMMENTS

During the initial and intensive inventory stages (1978-1980), many of the 13 comments discussed characteristics of the area (e.g., intrusions, resources, wilderness qualities) or suggested boundary changes. Reasons given for supporting wilderness study area status were the following: opportunities for solitude, naturalness and special features. Reasons given for opposing wilderness study area status were these: other resource values, roads, intrusions and lack of outstanding opportunities for solitude.

Three formal public meetings were held in Nevada (Gerlach on November 1, Winnemucca on November 3 and Reno On November 8, 1983) during the 90-day comment period for the Draft Wilderness Environmental Impact Statement. Of the five oral comments received, three people supported more wilderness than that of the preferred alternative and two people supported the preferred alternative. Of the 78 people who submitted written comments, 65 of them supported more wilderness than that listed in the draft EIS and thirteen of them supported the draft EIS. The comments remarked on the spectacular scenery of the canyon, the trees in the canyon and the raptors and other wildlife in the area.

No comments about wilderness were received from Humboldt County agencies or officials. However, the county's land use plan addresses wilderness designation specifically under Goal 5: "To prevent commonly used areas of Humboldt County from being erroneously designated as 'wilderness or roadless areas'. In addition, Goal 6 states: "To maintain the existing roads and access necessary to the continued economic well being of Humboldt County including the agriculture, livestock, mining and tourist industries as well as to maintain the quality of life in Humboldt County by ensuring access to recreational lands of all kinds including fishing, wildlife, rock-hounding, sightseeing, off road vehicle use, horseback and backpacking use and general enjoyment of the {sic} Nevada's traditional wide open spaces."

Because the terms "commonly used area" and "erroneously designated as wilderness" are not defined, it is difficult to determine whether wilderness designation is consistent or inconsistent with Goal 5. Wilderness designation could be both consistent and inconsistent with Goal 6 since wilderness designation would ensure public access for most recreational activities mentioned but close areas to off-road use.

The Governor of the State of Nevada concurred with the Bureau's recommendation.

No comments were received on the final EIS.